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The Apostolate of the Early Church

A Study of the Methods and Men Who Spread the Faith throughout the Roman Empire

by

V. Rev. Msgr. T. J. McMahon; S.T.D.

Volume 4, Number 4

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THE APOSTOLATE OF THE EARLY CHURCH

1
Introduction

1. We risk laboring a most obvious point when we speak of the apostolate of the early Church, for in no other age has the mission consciousness been deeper and the challenge to the missionary more overwhelming. The early followers of Christ had known, first hand, the blessed Saviour, and many of them had heard His all consuming mandate: "Going, therefore, teach ye all nations; baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and behold, I am with you all days, even to the consummation of the world" (Matt. XXVIII, 19, 20).

2. In one headlong march from the Cenacle—out from Palestine, up to Syria, east to Arabia, Mesopotamia and Persia, west to Egypt and Africa, north to Europe and south to the limits of India—went the faithful Twelve. Endowed with the security of divinity, the first missionaries followed their God-given mandate literally, so that every age has been fired with zeal to do what they did. They made the early Church "Jesus Christ poured out and communicated to men."

3. Every Catholic schoolboy has some notion of how the early Church took over an Empire and converted a world. "Hesterni sumus!" Tertullian could cry at the end of the second century. "We are a people of yesterday, and we have filled every place among you—cities, islands, fortresses, towns, market places, the very camps, companies, palace, Senate and Forum. We have

left you only the temples" (*Apol. Adv. Gentes,* 37: Pl. 1, 525). And how quickly even the temples, the very Pantheon itself, were converted into Christian basilicas!

4. The same apologist, at a time when the Apostles had been gone from the earth only a century, could extend the vision of the Church far beyond the limits of the great Roman Empire: "Upon whom else have all nations believed but upon the Christ who has already come? For whom have the other nations believed—Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and they who inhabit Mesopotamia, Armenia, Phrygia, Cappadocia, and those dwelling in Pontus and Asia, and Pamphylia, sojourners in Egypt, inhabitants of the region of Africa beyond Cyrene, Jews and other nations; as now the varied sects of Gaetulians, and manifold confines of the Moors, all the limits of Spain, and the diverse nations of Gaul, and the places of Britain inaccessible to the Romans, but subjugated to Christ, and of Sarmatians and Dacians, and Germans and Scythians, and of many remote nations and provinces and many islands unknown to us and which we hardly enumerate? In all these places, the name of Christ, who has already come, now reigns" (*Defense Against the Jews,* 7: Pl. 11, 649).

5. Centuries later the poet Rutilius summed up these apostolic endeavors: "Urbem fecisti quod prius orbis erat!" while Pope Leo the Great boasted: "O Rome, although you have extended your empire on land and sea, by the weight of many victories, yet far less indeed is that which war has brought you than the Christian peace has won for you" (*Sermo* LXXXII, Pl. LIV, 423). The historian Harnack described the intervening years very succinctly, when he wrote: "Seventy years after the Christian community was founded at Antioch, Pliny writes, in a most apprehensive vein, that the pagan gods are endangered in Bithynia. Another seventy years and the Easter controversy proves that there was firm Christian organization from Lyons in Gaul to Edessa in Mesopotamia, with its center at Rome. Seventy years more and the Emperor Decius would prefer at Rome a rival emperor than the Christian bishop. A final seventy years of early Christian apostolic labors and Constantine crowns the Roman

imperial insignia with the Cross of Christ" (*Die Mission und Ausbreitung,* 413 sq.).

6. All this is very commonplace in our knowledge and a further chronicle would be grossest repetition. The student of the missions already knows what was the extent of the apostolate of the early Church. Our own aim, in this study, will be to probe the inner workings of this apostolate, to deal more with methods and with men, and more precisely, with laymen and women, wherever possible. What was the "behind the scenes" apostolate of the age we are studying?

Early Christianity and Paganism

7. "How slow and uncertain might have been the spread of the Christian religion," writes Bishop Shahan, in his *The Beginnings of Christianity,* "if its apostles had been obliged at every step to deal with new governments, new prejudices, new languages! Hence the Christian Fathers saw in the splendid unity of the Empire something providential and divine."

8. There are two perfectly legitimate ways of approaching the topic of early Christianity in its relation to paganism. The usual one is to contrast Christianity with Greco-Roman civilization and to emphasize the points of difference. But there is another approach, a very important one for the correct understanding of how the Christian message was able to enter the inner precincts of the Roman Empire. The early Christian received his faith within that Empire. His Church became an essential element in the life of that great unity, which it gradually permeated. However much its members may have been at war with contemporary society, as to faith and morals, they were still a part of its life. In individual homes a pagan husband might live with a Christian wife, a Christian master with pagan slaves or vice versa. In the public life of a community a Christian shopkeeper might deal with pagans, or a Christian senator legislate with his pagan confreres. "We cohabit, we sail, we war, we till, we traffic with you, we likewise communicate our arts and work

for the public," wrote Tertullian to Marcus Aurelius (*Apology,* c. 52).

Community of Interests

9. Halliday, in his admirable *Pagan Background of Early Christianity,* justly says that this second point of view, this emphasis on the essential bonds which linked the early Christians with the life and thought of contemporary paganism, is equally legitimate. Every Christian apologist of the time protested this community of interests between pagan and believer. Each one hastened to show how useful the Christian community was to the common good. Trite, though tried, is the paragraph from the anonymous Epistle to Diognetus:

> Christians are not distinct from the rest of mankind in land or language or customs. For they nowhere inhabit cities of their own, nor do they use any different form of speech, nor do they practice any peculiar mode of living. . . . They inhabit cities, Greek or Barbarian, wherever the lot of each has cast him, and they follow local custom in their clothes, food and general way of living. (5, PG 11, 1174)

10. Such an approach will, to our mind, help us to interpret the all too meager documents with far greater penetration. This does not mean that we shall have to abdicate the miraculous and the divine in the early propagation of the Faith. Indeed, we accentuate it. The Church survived this Greco-Roman setting, with its zenith of culture and its depths of corruption, and for all the development of doctrinal terms brought on by this contact with a learned world, the Apostle's Creed remained the infallible expression of the daily teaching of the Church.

11. Single prospective converts would multiply into the millions, catechetical schools would grow into universities, simple treatises and apologies blossom out into the Catecheses of St. Cyril of Jerusalem, expand into the giant theological speculations of that greatest of the Church's intellectuals, St. Augustine, Gen-

eral Councils would canonize new words and definitions of unchanging doctrines, and all the while the Creed would come thundering down through the ages of faith. Its simplicity, its completeness, its unmistakable traces of apostolic environment give credence to the tradition noted by Rufinus, to the effect that the Apostles, before they dispersed, received from Christ the command to compose a rule of faith and thus preserve the unity of the Church's teaching. Whatever be the truth, the nearness, the personal devotion to Christ of this Creed and of the first missionaries who taught it to every catechumen is the key to their initial successes. Yet the simple formulas and the words of preachers, holy in their simplicity, were being given to a very complex world.

2

The Lay Apostolate

12. Closeness to Christ, the indelible memory of His parables and miracles, the power of the Spirit of Divine Love, immeasurable gifts of grace would help them to reconcile their world, for Galilean fishermen, peasants and tax-gatherers could never have done it otherwise. Imagine, for a moment, the audience before St. Peter on those days after Pentecost. True, they were endowed with a knowledge of the Messias and they had been waiting prayerfully for the great day of his coming, but they were not prepared to have His message brought to them by a simple fisherman, even though each heard his garbled dialect in his own tongue.

13. With that confidence in the possession of truth, which should be the mark of every missionary, Peter tells them what to do: "Do penance and be baptized everyone of you in the name of Jesus Christ, for the remission of your sins: and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost" (Acts 11, 38). The five thousand who were converted became the nucleus of the Christian "world of tomorrow." Back they went to homes still full of unbelievers, to a world which had scarcely heard of the Crucifixion. In town after town, they founded the "house churches" to which the apostles would come. Here was the lay apostolate already begun.

14. Even St. Paul, whose graduated theological preaching Peter found so "hard to understand," keeps that same apostolic simplicity of nearness to Christ, for, as Chrysostom says, "no man loved God more than Paul." Yet Paul was the "vessel of election" to the educated gentile world. The community at Jerusalem never fully understood him, because his was, in so many ways, a radical departure from the old simple method, and still

it was the same: "When I came to you, I came not in loftiness of words or of wisdom, proclaiming to you the gospel of Christ, for I judged not myself to know anything among you, save Jesus Christ and Him crucified." The great sword of the Messias, about which the boy had dreamt at Tarsus, was forged on the anvil of humiliations and sufferings.

15. He shook the dust from his feet in the synagogues of the Jews, he wrote the Galatians when he had won the fight to burst the bonds of Jewish exclusiveness and to comprehend the vision of the truly universal Church: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free: there is neither male nor female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 111, 28). He became "all things to all men, that he might gain all"—the perfect rule for the successful missionary.

16. Compare his preaching in a synagogue of Asia Minor with his Sermon on the Unknown God to the Greek Philosophers of the Athenian Areopagus. Read his scathing epistles to the Corinthians and his laudatory remarks to churches that are running well. Mark his frankness on the detection of insincerity or treachery and his priestly exhortations to Timothy and Titus. Paul was conscious of his audience, for with them he was peopling and multiplying the Church of Jesus Christ.

Priesthood of the Laity

17. It is Paul the Traveller who, of all the apostles, reveals to us the mission-mindedness of those early Christians but it is Peter who charted the course of their apostolate. "Be you also as living stones built up, a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ." "You are a chosen generation, a kingly priesthood, a holy nation" (I Pet. II, 5, 9). Pope Pius XI was the heir to this tradition on the lay priesthood, when he wrote in his very first encyclical, on Catholic Action: "Say to your faithful layfolk that when they, united with their priests and their bishops, participate in the work of the apostolate, then, more than ever, they are the chosen race,

the holy people, the people of God, extolled by St. Peter . . . Those whom our High Priest Jesus Christ uses as His ministers to offer a clean oblation in every place from the rising of the sun to the going down thereof, they indeed, are the partakers of that priesthood in the office of offering satisfaction and sacrifice. *But not they alone,* the whole body of Christians rightly called by the Prince of the Apostles a chosen generation, a kingly priesthood must offer sacrifice for sin for themselves and for the whole human race, just as every priest taken from among men is ordained for men in the things that appertain to God."

18. The French Jesuit, Father Paul Dabin, has collected the chief points of this tradition in a delightful brochure, which he calls *L'Apostolat Laique.* "The priesthood of the laity," he says, "is so long lived that it is possible to go back to apostolic times and to find precursors of Catholic Action among the seventy-two disciples of Our Lord" (*ib,* p. 18). We find abundant examples of this apostolate on the part of the laity in the Gospels, Epistles and the Acts, and the complete vindication of it in the writings of the Fathers, those flowers of the Apostolic Age. The idea that the fully Christian life raises the dignity of the laity almost to the level of the priesthood is to be found in the whole patristic tradition, both Greek and Latin.

19. The foregoing statement is liable to grave misconceptions, for God has given to man no greater dignity than that of the sacrificial priesthood of His holy Altar. However, the laity can approach this dignity the more nearly they conform to the divinely ordained apostolate of the priesthood. This is what St. Ambrose meant, when he wrote: "All the children of the Church are priests: we are all anointed, so to speak, for the holy priesthood in offering *spiritual sacrifices* to God" (PL. XVII, 436, 437). St. Irenaeus, before him, had said: "All the just are of priestly rank" (*Adv. Haereses,* IV, 8: PG., VII, 995). After Ambrose, St. Augustine gave precision to this notion of the priesthood of the laity. Commenting on Apocalypse XX, 6: "They shall be priests of God and of Christ and shall reign with Him for a thousand years," he writes in *The City of God:* "This was

certainly not said only of bishops and priests, who are called by that name in the Church. We use the same for all Christians because of the mystical anointing. Indeed, we call them all priests because they are members of One Only Priest. Of them, St. Peter says: 'A holy people, a royal priesthood' " (PL, XLI, 676). The best encyclopedist of the Fathers, St. Thomas, stresses this idea of St. Augustine in the *Summa Theologica* (III, qu. 63, art. 5), and in Question 82 (art. 1, ad 2) he further qualifies it: "The just layman is united to Christ by a spiritual union through faith and charity, but not by sacramental power. That is why he has a *spiritual priesthood* to offer spiritual sacrifices."

20. The foundation and measure of this "priesthood" is certainly the sacramental character, impressed on the soul in Baptism and Confirmation. This communicates to man a likeness to Christ, a resemblance not of nature—for this comes through sanctifying grace—but a similarity of function. As A. d'Alès says: "The sacramental character itself is a participation in the priesthood of Christ" (*Bapteme et Confirmation,* p. 94). Naturally, only the sacerdotal character of Holy Orders renders priests participants, in the proper sense, of the priesthood of Christ, in that it gives them that active power of administering the Sacraments, but it cannot be gainsaid that the character given the laity in Baptism and Confirmation confers on them a participation in the same priesthood, in that larger sense of which the Fathers speak.

21. By so speaking, everyone should be mindful of the fact that these notions must never lead to a lessening of the primacy and authority of the hierarchy and priesthood. St. Ignatius wrote: "Where the Bishop is, there is the Church of Jesus Christ." It is, therefore, with this very rich background of patristic emphasis, properly understood, that we continue to use the terms "lay priesthood" and "priesthood of the laity" as synonyms for the full apostolate of Catholic Action, wherein, as Pope Pius XI repeated, the task of the laity approaches that of the priesthood.

22. We see this priesthood in action very clearly in St. Paul.

Paul's salutations at the end of his Epistles, however misplaced some may claim them to be, reveal the high place the laity had already taken in his missionary enterprises. Just as the Gospels brought into the arena of the Church outstanding laymen like Nicodemus and the centurion, and the Acts lead in many more, so Paul's greetings to numerous laymen and women indicate what was going on behind the scenes of his breathtaking exploits.

Women as Missionaries

23. It may be interesting, at this point, especially because the Holy Father has reminded the women of our day to recognize their destiny, "for this is their day," to note the part that women played in the missionary work of the early Church. Back in 1917, T. B. Allworthy of Cambridge University was so struck by this special Christian "feminist" movement that he wrote his illuminating book, *Women in the Apostolic Church*. "While it cannot without exaggeration be said that early Christianity was primarily a woman's movement," writes Allworthy, "there is no doubt that women formed a considerable part of the membership of the Church from the first."

24. The many women who had been attached to Our Lord as "disciples" were included in the original nucleus of the Christian society. In Palestine, in Syria, Asia Minor, in Greece and in Rome, women were among the first to respond to the preaching of the Gospel. That arch enemy of Christendom in the third century, Celsus, taunts the Church with the accusation that the Faith appealed only to the ignorant and to women. But what missionaries these women must have been in the milieu of their own families, and how some of them must have suffered for the Faith! The Pauline privilege indicates the obstacles some of these Christian spouses endured in the pursuit of virtue. At least, at one center, Philippi, the Christian congregation originated with women. This is true elsewhere, a fact which makes more imperative a study of this feature of the Apostolic Age. Our Lord's treatment of women implied a recognition of their personality as of equal value with that of men. Not only were women admitted

to His instructions, but some of his deepest teachings were imparted to them, and to those whose personal services he accepted, he gave a place of honor among His followers.

25. From Mary, Queen of the missions and co-redemptrix of the human race, down to the noble St. Helena, the women held a high place in the apostolate. They come from every class, from the palace of the Caesars, the homes of the noble rich, the hovels of peasants and poor, and they are as constant in their willingness to suffer for the Faith as are the menfolk. The most beautiful of the Acts of the Martyrs, those of Saints Perpetua and Felicity, bespeak the admiration of the pagan mob: "The populace shuddered as they saw one young woman of delicate frame and another with breasts still drooping from her recent childbirth" (PL 111, 51).

Helped First Missionaries

26. Paul always refers to such women as Prisca, Evodia, Syntiche as fellow-workers, fellow-evangelists. In Romans XVI he puts a special seal of approval on their labors: "Salute Mary, who has labored much among you. . . . Salute Tryphaena and Tryphosa, who labor in the Lord." Most necessary for him who had departed from the synagogues was the provision of a house in which the missionaries could accommodate the congregation when it assembled for worship or instruction. It was frequently a woman of some means who met the need. Some married women like Prisca cooperated with their husbands in placing their houses at the disposal of local communities. "Salute Aquila and Prisca, my helpers in Christ Jesus . . . and the church which is in their house" (Rom. XVI, 3, 5). Phoebe is "our sister in the ministry of the Church . . . she also hath assisted many and myself also."

27. St. John Chrysostom has much to say of these apostolic women in his homilies on St. Paul's Epistles: "You see, these were noble women, hindered in no way by their sex in the course of virtue; and this is, as might be expected, for in Christ Jesus

there is neither male nor female." Theirs was a domestic apostolate, of prayer and example, but it was also one of instruction and works of mercy. They were the Ladies Aid Societies of the early Church, and there were not wanting the virgins, the deaconesses, who foreshadowed our Religious Orders of women. They helped the first missionaries to preach the gospel to the poor.

28. Far more numerous were the laymen who came to the aid of the missionaries, and with the women, they gave rise to a current in patristic writing, which is most revealing to us children of a Tridentine tradition, wary of Calvin's common priesthood of the Christian man. That oldest of non-canonical books, the *Didache,* describes those itinerant missionaries, who had received from the Lord the charisma of the apostolate (chap. XI, XIII). Tertullian the lawyer, himself a layman, asks: "Are not we laymen priests?" (*De Exhort. Castitatis,* c. 7, PL 11, 922). Even though his statement has been twisted by the Calvinists to their own position, he was completely in the apostolic tradition, for he like many others protested that this ordination to the priesthood of the laity had come in Baptism and Confirmation, where, too, there are anointings.

29. What a lay apostolate Tertullian waged while he was yet a Catholic and before he succumbed to Montanism! To him must go the credit for the formation of our first theological terminology, while no one of his time has given us a better defense of Christianity against the pagan world. "Who ever looked well into our religion but came over to it? And who ever came over to it, but was ready to suffer for it, to purchase the favor of God, and obtain the pardon for all his sins, though at the price of his blood? for martyrdom is sure of mercy" (*Apol.* c. L, Reeve's transl.).

Prayer and Example

30. St. John Chrysostom, as usual, is the summarist of the apostolic tradition of lay participation in the work of the hierarchy. For him, marriage is a priesthood. "Say your prayers in common, go together to church, and on your return, speak with

one another about what has been read and preached. If you are poor, you are still more honored than all the great and rich of the world. The man who contracts marriage with this point of view will cede nothing in merit to the solitaries. Married as he is, he will be no less esteemed than those who are not" (*Hom.* XX *in Eph.* PG. XXXII, col. 514).

31. Even against those who despise the monastic life, he has something special to say for the laity: "Jesus Christ did not use the words 'secular' and 'religious'. Not only the one who has left the world must lead a perfect life, while those in the world neglect the work of perfection (PG. LVII, 81). He fires the laity with their specific apostolate, in another sermon: "Do not be full of fervor and zeal for the present moment, but go out and bring salvation to the city. With our wives and our children, let us depart on that holy expedition, and let us wrest from the ranks of Satan those whom he has made captive. Bring these souls to the feet of the priests, and, then, by the grace of God, you can say that you have had a part in the conquest" (*Hom. in Saulus adhuc spirans,* PG. LI, 116). Every Father who touches the subject—and the number is surprisingly large—invites the laity to imitate the priests not only in individual perfection but also in zeal for souls. Their priesthood, in the home and in the public forum, was to be one of prayer, of preaching by example, of labor for souls, of sacrifice.

The Ages of Faith

32. These encomia and exhortations of our early preachers and writers did not fall on deaf ears. There is no layman, of whatever class or station he be, in the Church today, who cannot find an example for his apostolate and his mission consciousness in those ages of faith. Catholic Action in those days was the aim of the rich and the poor, the noble and the lowborn, the professional artisan and the unskilled workman, the soldier and the civilian, the master and the slave.

33. When Celsus hurled the charge against the early Church

that she could recruit converts only from the lowborn, the stupid, and the women, Origen answered him. In his *Contra Celsum,* he claims that the calumniator had said: "If all men wished to become Christians, the Christians themselves would be opposed." "This is manifestly false," writes Origen, in the early years of the 3rd century, "because the Christians, just because they are Christians, must spread their beliefs to the ends of the earth. . . . If sometimes need forces to them to beg, they are contented with the strict minimum, although a large number of people wish to help them abundantly. Even when, among those who have now embraced the faith, there are the rich, persons in dignity, women of noble distinction, will anyone be bold enough to say that it is with the desire of gain and glory that some preach the faith of the Christians? At the beginning of Christianity, when so many real dangers beset these teachers, that accusation could not have been made" (PG. XI, 951).

Illustrious Converts

34. The historian Gibbon (*Decline and Fall,* ed. Bury, 11, 70) blindly repeated the charge of Celsus, claiming that the Church was "almost entirely composed of the dregs of the populace," but he too had his Origen in Sir William Ramsay, who in his *Church in the Roman Empire* (p. 57), makes the more logical claim that Christianity "spread at first among the educated more rapidly than among the uneducated." Early in the history of the Church, consuls, senators, soldiers in command, noble ladies like Pomponia Graecina, the wife of Plautus, the Roman general in command of the forces in Britain, joined the ranks of the faithful. Curiously enough, only the pagan documents mention these illustrious converts from Roman families.

35. Lanciani says that "in no Church document is mention made of the two Domitillae or Flavius Clemens or Petronilla, all of whom were related to the Flavian Emperors; or of the Acilii Glabriones, the noblest among the noble . . . whose fortunes and death are described only by the Roman historians and biographers of the time of Domitian" (*Pagan and Christian Rome,*

p. 11). And these waged an apostolate among those of their own class, as is evidenced by the house church of the senator Pudens and his daughters. Absence of written evidence leaves only conjecture, but what evidence we have gives us everywhere Christians of higher social standing, while the majority of the converts were from people of middle class. This still leaves room for Christ's beloved poor in the annals of the early Church, and the missionary apostolate of caring for them was shared by their more fortunate brethren since the day when the faithful of Antioch heard there was a famine among their fellow Christians of Jerusalem. A somewhat labored, though extremely valuable book, if only for the texts it quotes and for its illustrations of this point, is *The Story of Social Christianity* by Francis Herbert Stead, a non-Catholic.

Philosophy and Christianity

36. As the list of converts grew longer and the ecclesiastical writers more numerous, the first clash of St. Paul with pagan philosophy on the Areopagus was repeated a thousandfold, and it became more manifest than ever before that the Church had a definite appeal to the intellectuals of the Greco-Roman world. When we arrive at the age of Basil, the Gregories, Chrysostom and Athanasius, of Jerome and Augustine, the pagan world has been intellectually conquered, but long before this the examples of an intellectual apostolate, not only on the part of priests but of laymen, like Minucius Felix along the sands of Ostia, are numerous enough. The Alexandrians of the 3rd century were certainly the "sophistocrats" of the Empire, and Clement met them with a cultured optimism. Someone has called him the St. Francis de Sales of the early Church, for he did put the sharp sword of Christian truth in the silken sheath of urbanity. His "Didascalia," or Cathechetical School, was the perfect model of numerous others, such as Jerusalem, Antioch and Rome, which had begun in the days of the Apostles, for the instruction of converts.

37. "Clement's prodigious learning," writes Cayre, "appeared to have no other rule than *the enthusiasm of the apostle*" (*Patrology,* 1, 179). He made Alexandria the brain of the Catholic world, while Rome remained its heart. Before him, in this first of Catholic universities, sat pagan idolaters, the usual catechumens and baptized Christians, all of them with a smattering of the philosophies of the day. He became the pioneer in showing the relations between philosophy and Christianity, reason and faith, Catholic morality and the pagan world. Christian philosophy and theology were in their infancy as to terminology in the days of Clement, and all his writings must be read with real prudence, but no one can deny that he who claimed philosophy to be the "paedagogus ad Christum" for the pagans and the Law to be the same for the Jews, intended less to provide his hearers with a theological compendium than to build up within them the perfect Christian by a more profound knowledge of human and divine things. He was helping his pagan students to cast off "the toy of humanity's childhood," and certainly many of them must have gone forth as apostles of the new found faith. Here is the Church of Christ, less than two centuries old, producing great minds and great schools, at a time when it is still a persecuted "cult" of the Roman Empire.

The Soldier and Christ

38. We could go on in our speculations as to the apostolate of the various classes of Roman society. Speeding along Roman roads, in an age when travel was most common, were artisans, merchants, teachers, the soldiers of Caesar's legions, all carrying the good news of the Master. Already we see the attraction of the soldier to Christ in the person of the centurion, and to Christ's Apostle in the person of Cornelius. Directly the Roman army could not, in pagan days, be enrolled in the Christian apostolate, for there were many questions of conscience which made it hard for a Christian to remain a soldier. Tertullian, himself a soldier's son, while protesting the loyalty of Christians to the Emperor, cites some very honorable objections against Christian military

service, but he also triumphantly relates the apostolate of prayer waged by the so-called "Thundering Legion" in the army of Marcus Aurelius. According to the African apologist, Marcus Aurelius and his army were miraculously preserved from perishing with thirst by a seasonable shower of rain, procured by the prayers of Christian soldiers (*Apology,* c. 5; Address to Scapula, c. 4. See also his *De Corona Militum*).

39. The story of the martyrs in the persecutions gives ample evidence of the constancy of the soldier converts. The apostolate of the individual soldier could have been great in the Roman army, which blended all the races of the Empire. There were Gauls and Germans even in the bodyguard of Herod the Great, and already at the battle of Philippi there had been Gauls, Lusitanians and Spaniards, serving with the armies of the East under Brutus and Cassius. The day would come when the Cross of Christ would be mounted on their banners and the Labarum of Constantine would be proudly carried by Christian soldiers.

3

Apostolate of the Slave

40. Far more intriguing than all the missionary endeavors is the apostolate of the slave. Gradually, over five centuries, the Christian influence would pervade Roman law in the matter of slavery as in everything else, but, in the meantime, as Halliday (*op. cit.*) says, "the influence of Christian slaves in spreading the Gospel is notorious." Celsus denounced as the most dangerous missionaries of the new faith the Christian slaves in the homes of the rich Romans. Paul Allard gives the evidence in his unique volume *Les Esclaves Chretiens*. Twenty-five pages he devotes to "L'Apostolat Domestique," the missionary apostolate in the sanctuary of the home, of the slave with the master, of the master with the slave. "The Christian teacher, the Christian doctor, the Christian nurse, what obscure agents of domestic propaganda!" Chrysostom calls the soul of the Christian slave in the pagan home "a pearl gleaming in the darkness" (Hom. LXXII in Gen. 1) and St. Augustine, in his *Confessions* (IX, 8), lays the formation in sanctity of his holy mother, St. Monica, at the feet of an old Christian slave, whose beautiful and perfect Christian life he goes to some lengths to describe. The Emperor Septimus Severus, cured by a Christian freedman, chose a Christian nurse for his son. And the slaves went to martyrdom with the free man, joyful in their new found Christian fraternity and equality.

Masters and Slaves

41. If the slaves profoundly affected the lives and morals of their masters, even converting them, how much more the masters could do for the slaves. Through Christian doctrine, the attitude of the master to the slave underwent a moral and intellectual revolution. A noble virgin of Ravenna, Fusca, instructed her nurse,

Maura, a slave. (v. *Acta SS.* t. 11, p. 645) The priest and Christian philosopher of Caesarea, so much praised by the historian Eusebius, taught Porphyry, his slave, the true faith, and the slave was martyred right after his master. Some masters even converted the slaves of others, while others helped them to flee, when their morals were endangered by pagan masters. In the Acts of the martyr Pionius, there is the story of his convert Sabina, whose master tried to draw her back into paganism. The priest procured for her an asylum, changing her name to Theodora, so as to escape search more easily. So we can agree with Chrysostom, when he preaches: "So great is the excellence of virtue, that the slave as well as the master is able to do good for the whole house." (In Ep. II. ad Thess. V, 4, 5)

42. The Church could not abolish slavery, but it was preparing the world into which it was born for a great social revolution. In the beginning St. Paul had touched off the spark in his Epistle to Philemon. Onesimus, the fugitive slave of this great friend of Paul, had come to Rome, and one day he knocked on the Apostle's prison door. Paul converts the slave and sends him back to his master: "I, Paul, a prisoner of Jesus Christ, beseech thee for my son, whom I have begotten in my bands." (v. 10) "The letter to Philemon is not only a masterpiece of tact and politeness, it is in a way the beginning of the Christian declaration of the rights of man. . . . The early Church continued in Paul's high regard for human dignity, even though it were the slave's garments." (Holzner, *Paul of Tarsus,* 453)

Dignities Open to All

43. Access to ecclesiastical dignities was open to all, then as now. The Church chose its ministers alike from Christians of free birth, often of illustrious origin, and from among baptized slaves. No one ever protested against the choice. The descendants of the Cornelii, the Pompenii, the Caecilii gathered in a room of their palaces, converted into a church, or in some chapel of the catacombs, and inclined their heads with the same respect before

a noble born Bishop of Rome or before a fugitive slave, such as Callistus, occupying the same throne. Many of the early Popes must have been ex-slaves. Their names reveal volumes. Most of them are surnames, even the noblest on the list, Pius. One, Cornelius, indicates some kind of attachment to the "gens Cornelia." Names like Anicetus, Evaristus, Telesphorus, Hyginus, make us reminiscent of the Washingtons, Jacksons and Lees who followed on the Emancipation Proclamation, but their intellectual formation and actual status were far different. Callistus is only a Greek nickname, meaning beautiful, imposed on the youth by a capricious master. The surname Pius did not exist in the Roman Empire until it was assumed by the Emperor Antoninus Pius in 138. Did Pope Pius I, who began to rule about 140, take the name to do honor to this good, non-persecuting emperor, or is it not more likely that he had been a former slave in the imperial household, a conjecture further substantiated by the fact that his brother, Hermas, was a slave?

Church's Message For All

44. The career of the average Roman bishop of the first three centuries, while excellent material for Horatio Alger's best success stories, is a luminous example of the Church's mission to all classes of the ancient society. The freedman, or ex-slave, was the skilled artisan and the successful merchant. Only rarely do we find the ex-slave in the ranks of the poor plebs, the impoverished citizenry, whom the government contented with a dole of bread and circuses. Freed of his slavery he knew the value of his liberty. Having won his freedom, either through the kindness of his master or by buying it with "tips" carefully hoarded over the years, he became a respectable, though calculating citizen.

45. Those future Roman bishops, whose names indicate former slavery, became even more than respectable citizens. Their industry as freedmen, whether as teachers, merchants and artisans, gave them wealth and security. Converted to Christianity with their families, we can imagine them occupying honorable

and magnificent positions in the local Church at Rome. Later they were numbered among the clergy and, at last, venerable above all, they were elected Popes. Unless we so plot out the careers of many of our early Popes in those centuries, their names cannot be explained. What a glory to the Church of Christ that from the throne of the Galilean fisherman, ex-slaves ruled kings and Roman senators and the great born free! The apostolate of the slave had brought him to the pinnacle of Christendom.

46. Storm and strife beset the early Church. Persecution took its toll in thousands of martyrs. Heresiarchs tore at her seamless garment. Treachery arose within her ranks. But the number of the apostles increased, and the due harvest of souls was gleaned. Other ages would bring their own missionary problems, but the apostolate of the early Church had set the pattern of how those who stay near to Christ and to His power can invade the most powerful citadel of unbelief and reconcile a world. The great Augustine lived in a Christian Empire, just as the Church was presented with the missionary challenge of the barbarians, and his apostrophe to the Church could only have been written because of the supreme apostolate of the first three centuries.

> O Catholic Church, true Mother of Christians! Not only dost thou preach to us, as is meet, how purely and chastely we are to worship God Himself, Whom to possess is life most blessed; thou dost moreover so cherish neighborly love and charity, that all the infirmities to which sinful souls are subject, find their most potent remedy in thee. Childlike thou art in molding the child, strong with the young man, gentle with the aged, dealing with each according to the needs of his mind and of his body. Thou dost subject child to parent in a sort of free servitude, and settest parent over child in a jurisdiction of love. Thou bindest brethren to brethren by the bond of religion stronger and closer than the bond of blood. . . . Thou unitest citizen to citizen, nation to nation, yea, all men, in a union, not of companionship only, but of brotherhood, reminding them of their common

origin. Thou teachest kings to care for their people, and biddest people be subject to their kings. Thou teachest assiduously to whom honor is due, to whom love, to whom reverence, to whom fear, to when comfort, to whom rebuke, to whom punishment; showing us that while not all things nor the same things are due to all, charity is due to all and offense to none. (*De meribus Ecclesiae catholicae,* L. 1, c. 30, PL. XXXII)

Notes on Bibliography

Citations from the Fathers are given from Migne's monumental patristic collections, the Greek being marked "PG" and the Latin "PL". However, this will not prevent the members of the Academia from using the Scribner's English collection of the Ante-Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers. Useful additional material can be had from the Enchiridia—Denzinger (Bannwart-Umberg), *Enchiridion Symbolorum; Kirch, Enchiridion Fontium Historiae Ecclesiae Antiquae;* Rouet de Journel, *Enchiridion Patristicum.*

Ample patristic evidence, in direct and indirect quotation, will be found in the various books already indicated. The student may want to pursue further the chronicle of the mutual good works of the early Christians, and this he can do through Stead's *The Story of Social Christianity.* Other works, such as those of Dabin and Allard, are profuse in giving texts.

For the external extension of Christianity, any manual of Church History, such as McSorley's recent *Outline History of the Church by Centuries* (Herder), will serve well. However, to pursue the ideas of Halliday in his *The Pagan Background of Early Christianity,* a work like Lortza-Kaiser's *History of the Church* must be read.

Naturally, it is presumed that the student begins with a knowledge of the Gospels, Epistles, and of the Acts of the Apostles. The last two chapters of the Epistle to the Ephesians, on the mutual sanctification of the family, husband and wife, children and parents, master and slave, should not be neglected. A good Commentary on the Acts, such as Rackham's, should also be used.

The aim of the author is that the ideas he sketches in his paper can each be a topic for a seminar. Some students will immediately think of other aspects of the early Church's apostolate. It was one of prayer, and, therefore, some may want to delve into Duchesne's Christian Worship, on the development of the liturgy and of liturgical languages. The *Didache,* St. Justin's Apology

and the Apostolic Constitutions will be basic to such a research. Early missionary endeavor was one of preaching by example and instruction, on the part of the layfolk, and patristic, as well as scriptural, sources for this have already been suggested. The Acts of the Martyrs describe the complete devotion of the laity to the cause of Christ. However, one must not lightly pass over St. Cyprian's De Lapsis, for an adverse picture of what times of peace and the absence of persecution brought about even in the early Church.

A very fruitful source of research could be the patristic background of the Encyclicals of Pope Pius XI on Christian education, on labor and on Christian marriage. There is hardly a sermon of St. John Chrysostom, whom Newman calls "the most human of the masterpieces of grace," which does not touch on the question of the dignity of labor. Paul's own labors as a tentmaker, after the example of Christ the Carpenter, and the labors of the early Christians might be cited. There are always Clement's *Quis Divas Salvetur?* and St. Ambrose's remarkable *De Nabuthe Jesraelita* to add to this literature. Again, we see another form of the early Church's apostolate.

It is hoped that the seminarian, stimulated by such sentiments as are expressed in Heston's *The Priest of the Fathers* and foreshadowed in St. Gregory of Nazianzen's *Defense of My Flight,* in St. John Chrysostom's *On the Priesthood,* in St. Gregory the Great's *Pastoral Rule,* will delve more and more into the rich treasures of the Fathers and early ecclesiastical writers. In this way, the many facets of the apostolate of the early Church will shine in our own souls, and inspire greater zeal for the missionary challenge both at home and abroad.

Study Outline

Gerald C. Treacy, S.J.

Part 1. Paragraphs 1-28

So strong was the mission consciousness of the early Church that in a brief period the message of Christ had reached out into the whole world. The unity of the Roman Empire aided the rapid spread of Christianity. The fact too that the Christian was linked with the life and thought of contemporary paganism furthered the spread of the Faith. Christians were not distinct from their fellows in language and customs.

St. Paul gave the perfect rule for the successful missionary, becoming "all things to all men that he might gain all." St. Peter chartered the course of the mission apostolate by stressing the need for lay cooperation. All the Faithful are "a kingly priesthood." The foundation of this priesthood is the sacramental character impressed on the soul in Baptism and Confirmation. The tradition of the priesthood of the laity is both Apostolic and Patristic. Men and women played an important part in the missionary apostolate of the Early Church, as collaborators with Bishops and priests. As Pius XII has reminded women that "this is their day", so do we find the Apostolic age very much their age.

Questions

What did the Apostles make the early Church?
Why did the Fathers consider the unity of the Roman Empire providential?
What are the two ways of approaching early Christianity's relation to paganism?
How was the Christian message able to enter the inner life of the Empire?
How was the daily teaching of the early Church expressed?
What is the key to the initial success of the first missionaries?
What is the perfect rule for the successful missionary?
What did Pius XI say of the lay priesthood?
What is the foundation of this priesthood?
Were women active in the early Church apostolate?

Part 2. Paragraphs 29-46

St. John Chrysostom is the great summarist of the doctrine on lay participation in the work of the Hierarchy. This apostolate characterized the early Church. Rich and poor, learned and ignorant shared in it.

The lay apostolate of the early Church accounts for the fact that Christianity permeated every class in the Roman Empire. Intellectuals converted intellectuals, slaves brought Christian truth to slaves and often to masters. It is the glory of the early Church as it has been the glory of the Church in all ages that the door of the sanctuary swung open to the freed slave as easily as to the patrician. Some of her early Popes had been slaves. And though the Church could not abolish slavery for centuries, it was due to her that its conditions were softened.

Questions

For what is Tertullian to be given credit?
What do the Fathers teach regarding the lay apostolate?
How did Origen express the duty of the lay apostle?
What documents mention the conversion of the Roman nobility?
What class furnished the majority of converts?
Was the intellectual apostolate of the Church carried on only by priests?
In what respect was Clement of Alexandria a pioneer?
Did the Christian slave wield any apostolic influence?
Did the Church abolish slavery in the Roman Empire?
To what class in the Empire did many of the early Popes belong?

A NOTE ON THE AUTHOR

The V. Rev. Msgr., Thomas J. McMahon, S.T.D. is a priest of the Archdiocese of New York, ordained to the Holy Priesthood in the Chapel of the North American College, Rome, Italy by his Eminence, Francis Cardinal Marchetti Selvaggiani on December 5, 1933.

During his stay in Rome, he attended the University of Propaganda from 1930 to 1932, receiving the degree of Bachelor of Sacred Theology. From 1932 to 1936, he attended the Pontifical Gregorian University, from which he received the degree of Licentiate in 1934, and Doctor of Sacred Theology "Magna Cum Laude" in 1935. Before his final return to America in 1936, he did two years' post-graduate work in the Faculty of Church History, of the same University. He also served as a secretary in the Sacred Congregation for the Oriental Churches in Rome from 1934 to 1935, and did parochial work for three years of his priesthood spent there, in the parishes of Madonna dell'Orto, and St. Joseph.

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On August 14, 1943, Monsignor McMahon was appointed National Secretary of the Catholic Near East Welfare Association. In May 1945 he was made a Papal Chamberlain by His Holiness Pope Pius XII, with the title of Very Reverend Monsignor. Having travelled through the Near and Middle East twice in the past ten years, he has lectured throughout the United States on the present ominous conditions in those territories.

The study outline and questions for "The Apostolate of the Early Church," were formulated by Gerald C. Treacy, S.J., who has prepared study club editions of various encyclicals.

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